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\$478 million award for light-rail line adds up to the largest federal grant ever received by the state for a transportation project

Getting from downtown Minneapolis to downtown St. Paul in 2014 will take about 40 minutes on a Central Corridor light-rail train, the result of a \$957 million construction project half funded by Washington.

On Tuesday, those federal dollars became a reality. Peter Rogoff, chief administrator of the Federal Transit Administration, joined Gov. Mark Dayton, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak for the signing of the long-awaited "full funding grant agreement," which commits \$478 million in FTA money to the most expensive public works project in Minnesota history.

The award adds up to the largest federal grant ever received by the state for a transportation project, said Metropolitan Council Chairwoman Susan Haigh. The festive signing was held in front of a St. Paul audience of about 130 at the Minnesota Department of Revenue building, overlooking a section of Robert Street torn up for light-rail construction.

"I come from a really large family, and when we celebrate, we get loud," said Ramsey County Commissioner Jim McDonough, chairman of the county's Regional Rail Authority, before leading the room in a collective cheer.

Haigh introduced nearly a dozen speakers, most of whom have helped shepherd the metro's third passenger rail line from concept to construction amid opposition from Republican lawmakers and others who question spending public money on alternative transit during difficult times.

"We are today launching a much better project than was planned three years ago," Rogoff told

the crowd. In all, the Central Corridor project is expected to create 3,400 construction, management, engineering and operations jobs through 2014. He said 570 people have been put to work this year alone on the line itself, which is expected to usher in additional economic development along some of the poorest sections of University Avenue.

Transit "provides opportunities for growth," Rogoff said. "It provides opportunities for working

Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton, right, watches as U.S. Sen. Al Franken signs a \$478 million "full funding grant agreement" from the Federal Transit Administration for the Central Corridor LRT project at the Harold E. Stassen building in St. Paul on Tuesday April 26, 2011. Also pictured are (from left) U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff. (Pioneer Press: Richard Marshall) (Richard Marshall)

Americans ... to hold onto more of their own money and not spend it at the gas pump. This week, a number of oil companies will be recording their profits. I want you to know they're doing just fine."

The Central Corridor line, which is about 12 percent complete, will run from downtown Minneapolis along Washington and University avenues to the Capitol before turning down Robert and Cedar streets in downtown St. Paul. Its easternmost stop will be on Fourth Street, in front of Ramsey County's refurbished Union Depot.

Trains will continue without passengers into a Lowertown operations and maintenance facility at the end of Fourth Street, next to a site envisioned by St. Paul officials as a future St. Paul Saints ballpark.

Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, chairman of the Counties Transit Improvement Board, noted that 30 percent of the Central Corridor funding comes from a quarter-cent sales tax adopted by Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey and Washington counties. "They overcame the lure, the temptation of parochialism," said McLaughlin, praising the regional effort.

Met Council officials have said that local match helped lock in the federal money for the Central Corridor project and puts the metro in a competitive position to obtain additional funding for the proposed Southwest light-rail transit line, which would connect downtown Minneapolis to Eden Prairie.

Those plans will face tough public scrutiny. While the 12-mile Hiawatha light-rail line between downtown Minneapolis and the Mall of America in Bloomington is widely seen as a success, steadily generating more riders than initially predicted, the Met Council's second rail effort — the 40-mile Northstar commuter rail line from Minneapolis to Big Lake — ended 2010 about 20 percent below ridership projections.

According to the Met Council, an additional 9 percent of Central Corridor funding is coming from the state, with 7 percent from Ramsey County, 3 percent from Hennepin County and less than 1 percent from the Met Council, the city of St. Paul and the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a coalition of foundations.

Minority and small-business advocates still have a host of concerns about the Central Corridor project, ranging from how minority-owned businesses will survive construction to whether long-standing members of the Frogtown and Aurora-St. Anthony communities will be able to remain in place amid rising property values and taxes.

Rogoff said that before the grant signing, he spent Tuesday morning meeting with the Asian Economic Development Association and other Asian-American business owners along University Avenue, reassuring them that their concerns will not be ignored. He returned to the avenue to meet with additional business leaders later in the day.

"There's a lot of anxiety there, and it's understandable," Rogoff said. "There's very little value to all the increased economic activity and land appreciation if you're a business owner ... and you can't survive the construction phase."

In response to a federal ruling in a lawsuit filed against the U.S. Department of Transportation by the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP and other community advocates, the FTA this month ordered the Met Council to issue monthly reports on how \$14.78 million in mitigation funds are being spent along the corridor. The reports must include updates on small-business openings

and closings. The first report is due to the FTA on May 10.

The St. Paul City Council recently adopted a broad "pedestrian-friendly" rezoning plan that embraces taller, denser development along large stretches of University Avenue, which will lose most of its on-street parking to rail construction. Critics have questioned whether the plan does enough to support small businesses and affordable housing along the corridor.

With an ear to neighborhood concerns, the Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing and the Aurora-St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Center will host a community meeting from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, 375 Oxford St.